

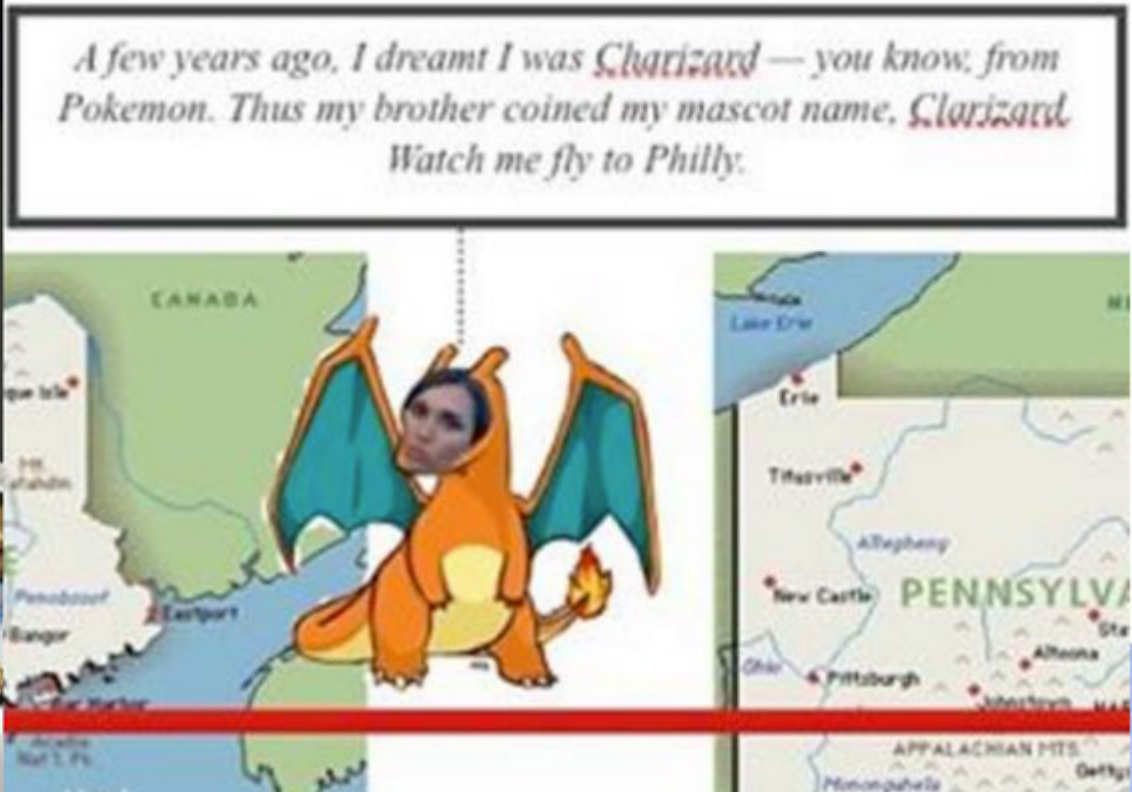
# Where to begin...

**The hard part** with these annual New Year's Letters has never been separating the personal from the political, but rather the big news from the merely noteworthy. But 2016 proved a bit different, and so the 2017 Vanderlips update reflects this shift. Not only was last year ridiculously jam-packed with family things worth relating, but our government just happens to have been hijacked by a cadre of fascists who, in the course of lying to all of us, convinced enough of "us" the country needed its lustre restored. Oh, and we're under attack, apparently. Whoops, I nearly forgot: Only the fascists can get us out of this mess. You wanna see a mess? Wait on 2017. As Carl Spackler ventured, "I don't think the heavy stuff is gonna come down for quite a while..." Okay. Enough doom and gloom; this is supposed to be a *happy* occasion. Clara's not a fascist (yay!) and she just happened to have logged one helluva 2016.

Clockwise from top: Another killer landscape from a boy & his camera; a family & their selfies; a dog & his hairballs; an Austrian & her two new siblings; a new graduate & her big brother; a barn on fire.







Where to begin, indeed... Clara served out her entire senior year as GNG class president, earned her International Baccalaureate diploma (matching her brother and working her buns off in the process), won the state championship in the shot put, organized all those senior activities (leading her fellow officers/seniors around like a herd of cats), and managed to get herself into the University of Pennsylvania, where she is right now, availing herself of the urbane Philly lifestyle, killing it academically, playing rugby (!), studying the classical harp, snagging parts in multiple plays, and not being a fascist. Anyone who's been through the meat-grinder that is the modern college-admissions process knows how much time it takes, what a mental slog it is. Clara bore it all, spit in the face of rejection, and ultimately bent the process to her considerable will. We couldn't be more happy for and proud of her. You might notice a preponderance of Clara-centric pictures in this edition of the Letter. This reflects the sheer volume of shit the girl got done in 2016. She is her mother's daughter, after all.

Somewhere in this welter of activity, the barn burned down. Actually, we can be pretty specific: It was 5 p.m. the Friday of Memorial Day weekend. Fire departments from 5 towns showed up and they did a great job keeping it from spreading to our house, the tinder-dry woods surrounding Camp Vanderlips, and our neighbors' homes. But save the few things Clara and I were able to grab from the ground floor (plus my laptop, thereby shielding Mandarin Media, Inc. from any real harm), it was pretty much a total loss — and a very surreal experience, to watch the thing burn, as a family, for three solid hours.



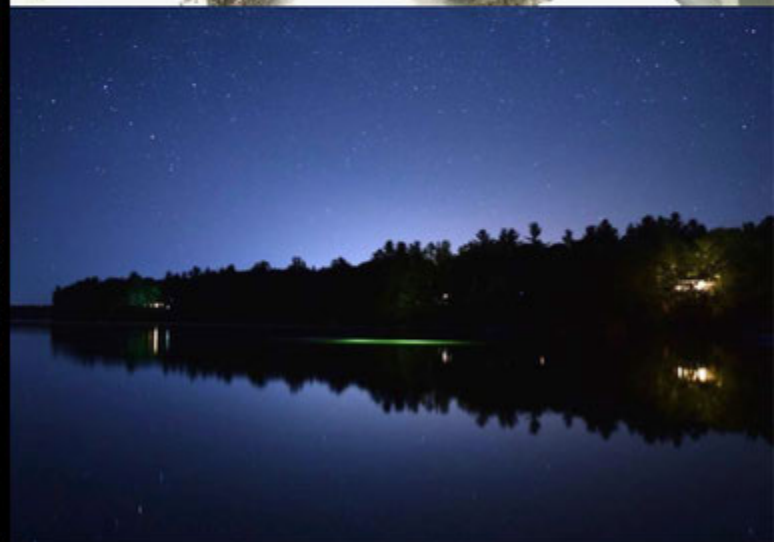
Big year for Ms. Clara: (clockwise from bottom right): Prom night; formal theatrics at Penn (fall production of the scatological, wildly entertaining "Batboy"); Ms. President presides at GNG Graduation; an excerpt from her Penn application supplement (the power of Pokemon clearly resonates with admission folks); Maine state champion in the shot put (and third in the discus!).







What started it? If only we could blame the fascists (like the Reichstag!). Alas we cannot. The deputy fire chief thought it was a stray, smoldering cigarette. The insurance company's fire-origin expert said it clearly started quickly and blamed small woodland creatures gnawing on wires in the barn's unfinished back half. We'll never know for sure. On one level, it doesn't matter. The insurance company did us right — thanks to Sharon's canny policy-taking, we were able to replace everything from the barn we wished to replace, including a lovely new structure in its stead. However, every week brings the realization that something else, something mundane, was unaccounted for. While getting the Christmas tree in December, I realized I didn't have the blue, nylon cinch-straps that I deployed to secure things like Xmas trees and canoes (gone) to car roofs, or sailboats (also melted) to trailers. This phenomenon tends to drive home the fact that while we did lose a bunch of arcana, most of which can be replaced, we lost tons that cannot — like an office full of the kids' drawings and family memorabilia. Witness at left a couple things for which I found digital renderings; I find myself hoarding these records, so they might not be forgotten. One does this with the mind, as well. Pegged to my old office wall had been the first thing Clara ever wrote: a note to me, written on cardboard, requesting assistance in untangling a long, beaded necklace that somehow got stuck in a ceiling fan. I have and will continue to commit it to memory: *Daddy Ples help us. Necles stuc in fan. Cant get it down. Ples ples help us get it down...*



Top left: Two irreplaceable items lost in the fire — a drawing from Silas (golf cart being abducted by aliens) and vintage Wes soccer poster. The effort to preserve such things in our memories is ongoing... Above: Sharon and magnetized-needle art in Philly, and a night shot of Sabbathday Lake from Silas. That green glow? Scuba diver.





Clockwise from top left: Chillin' at the State Meet; D.C. in May (simpler times); Sharon and the boy on the Clark Forks River; our old sofa, discovered backstage at GNG, 15 years after we junked it; evening view from the new barn; the Phillips matriarch and her grandkids on Xmas eve; at the October wedding of Fiona and Ben.



Okay, back to the uplifting bits. Silas isn't a fascist either. In fact, he continues to thrive at the University of Montana, in Missoula, where, as a junior, he has declared a triple major in environmental science, anthropology and the charming Ms. Renée Sanchez, who came to visit here just a few weeks back. A thoroughly adorable couple those two make, I must say. They were parted last summer when she was working up in Whitefish and Silas got a ranger gig at the other end of Montana — in the Beartooth Wilderness, just north of Yellowstone. He spent his time hiking into the outback (6-10 days at a time, alongside partner Marco), surveying trails, GPSing camp sites, water monitoring and, on a couple occasions, outrunning forest fires. Silas got a new camera sometime in 2016, and few have taken such prolific and artistic advantage. The lead image here, on page 1, is but one of example among hundreds now in the portfolio. The only downside to all of the boy's artifyin', intellectualizin' and adventurin' is, we don't see nearly enough of him. When he took off for the Beartooth last June, we weren't gonna see him again until Christmas. Ultimately, we flew him to Philly for Parents Weekend in October, and the four of us had a wonderful, throwback, mini-vacation together.





We did get a good month with Silas last spring, when he arrived home from school in mid-May. That was a crazy day. Bald Hill had expected to play a huge party on Peaks Island, and we did. But it was all a ruse: Our lead singer and drummer had secretly planned their own pop-up wedding, presided over by our mandolin player, an officer of the court (in relatively good standing). An even bigger party ensued, but Sharon and I had to catch an early boat in order to... meet Silas' plane. And once we'd done that, we high-tailed it up to Spring Meadows GC so that we might get a gander at... Clara and all her friends at prom (yet another event that she not only attended but organized). If memory serves, some 20 kids ultimately came back to Camp Vanderlips afterwards, sat by the fire for hours, then slept on our living room floor.

If there were a single day that epitomized our action-packed year, that might be it.

When Silas came home, he also met his new sister, Sandra, our Austrian exchange student who joined our family here from January to June (in Silas' room!), and what a great experience this proved for everyone concerned. We tried our best to show her around the unspoiled country (you know, prior to the onset of #ItHappenedHere); there were trips to D.C. and Philly and Florida and Boston and Montreal and Acadia National Park. Six months is along time; there were plenty of quiet nights at home, run-of-the-mill days at school. But on account of Clara's college search and graduation, Sandra did experience considerable travel, pomp & circumstance, an influx of relatives, all the senior activities, etc. I think she dug it. And let me apologize right here, Sandra, publicly, for raising eyebrows at Austria's near election of that right-winger in April. Turns out, he lost the run-off to the Green Party candidate and it was we Americans who elected the fascist. My bad.

**Clockwise from top left: Sharon managed to find cousins Valeri and Nathan, plus his girlfriend Kimmy, at the March; prayer flag; the March bus Sharon organized (note prayer flags above the grill); Silas & Renée in San Diego; Clara punishes Cornell; Bald Hill presides at "A New Gloucester Christmas".**





In late June, Sandra's family came to spend a week with us, before escorting her back to Vienna. Another amazing ruse was perpetrated here — somehow we managed to keep this from our ward all semester.

What of Sharon? Well, when she's not working, or quilting, or leading workshops in the art of prayer-flag creation, she is out there fighting fascism. I'm not kidding. For 20 years I've been the political one, but this summer, a bit out of the blue, she suggested we organize an event here at Camp Vanderlips to support our local Democratic candidates for state rep and senate. Both of them lost. When Hillary lost, too, Sharon was heart-broken, angered, then radicalized. She was among the first to secure and fill a bus for the Women's March (note the prayer flags draped across Sharon's coach previous page) and we're not done. It's really on us to stand up and fight for the pluralist country we inherited but are today at serious risk of frittering away.

And so we feather the empty nest with activism.



Clockwise from top: At 13', maybe the biggest Xmas tree ever; peekaboo at Penn's Morris Arboretum; Silas in backwoods/Beartooth mode; Lost Personages.